

A Milwaukee Tradition
A Comparative History of the Gay People's Union
And the City Club of Milwaukee
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Abstract

For over a century, there has been a tradition of progressive grassroots organization in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. As a result, a recognizable pattern has emerged amongst reform groups seeking reform even in vastly different eras like those inhabited by the early City Club of Milwaukee in the 1910's and the Gay People's Union (GPU) in the 1970's. Using available archival evidence, this paper will show that the GPU fit into that tradition and indeed pushed its envelope of that tradition to a level it had never seen before. In the early 1970's, grassroots community and student groups supportive of GLBT rights, like the GPU, formed in Milwaukee and began pushing for the rights of their members. They did this by pursuing and developing inter-group networking, organizational methods, and political agency that were consistent and comparable with techniques developed by progressive-era rights groups like the City Club of Milwaukee, while simultaneously developing a much more complex strategy for public outreach to help themselves obtain their vastly different goals.

“Take Heed,” the title of the first newsletter of the Gay People's Union proclaims boldly, exclaiming the beginning of a new era for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people everywhere throughout the United States: the 1970's.¹ The decade of the 1970's was the beginning of a new era where GLBT peoples started to feel safe enough to come out of the closet and meet others like them for the first time in recorded American history.² Throughout the early half of the 20th century and prior, people now classified as homosexual or gay were considered degenerates, perverts, or mentally ill; and prior to 1962, every single state in the United States had laws against “sodomy,” which was loosely defined to include sexual acts or behavior between two members of the same sex.³ Moreover, while some homosexual-friendly communities and environments did exist throughout the country between 1900 and 1950, the likelihood that these scattered bars and neighborhoods could bring together and coordinate the entire US population that could have identified with one of the GLBT categories was pure fantasy.⁴ Publication of homosexual-friendly material of any sort was illegal and carried with it the possibility of time in prison, and the social stigma of being either gay or gay-friendly.⁵ Coming out was a torturous act for many— in order to out themselves to their families and friends, homosexuals in these time periods ran incredible risks just to be able to be involved in relationships of their choosing. It was a situation where the risks outweighed the benefits; the possibilities of being cast out of social circles, losing jobs and livelihoods, or even the threat of losing the stability of a supportive family were very common fears. Some that came out ran even greater risks than simply being cast out of social circles; the murder of openly GLBT people was not an unheard-of consequence of living an out-of-the-

¹ Gay People's Union. *Take Heed* 1 (August 6, 1970).

² Ibid.

³ Painter, George. "The History of Sodomy Laws in the United States." Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. 2001. Accessed October 27, 2010. <http://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/sensibilities/wisconsin.htm>

⁴ The terms “GLBT” and “LGBT” will be used in this paper to represent the terms “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered,” and both will be used throughout, as they are both correct.

⁵ Gross, Larry P., and James D. Woods. *The Columbia Reader on Lesbians and Gay Men in Media, Society, and Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

closet life even after the era of the GPU, much less earlier.⁶ Where the Gay Rights Movement of the 21st century is pushing for the legalization of gay marriage and open service of GLBT people in the military, the Gay Rights Movement of the 1970's was the fight for homosexuals to simply be able to move out of their closets and into the public sphere without fear of oppression.

In this context of discrimination, Milwaukee presented itself as a good place for GLBT people to begin organizing a culture and a community of their own. Despite the fact that the nationwide discrimination towards GLBT people was felt just as heavily in Milwaukee as it was in other places, Milwaukee had a long-running tradition of being a hub of progressive thought and forward-thinking culture. Having elected socialist mayors after the turn of the 20th century and supported a long list of grassroots progressive organizations during the city's earlier reformist years, Milwaukee was a prime urban environment for growing social movements. Spontaneous, community fueled, and apolitical insofar as party affiliation was concerned, grassroots groups that formed during this era helped establish a precedent and a mold that future groups followed— even if said groups were a part of a nationwide movement. One of the organizations that helped form that mold was the City Club of Milwaukee, a “civic” club that appealed to the upper-class progressives in the city. The City Club provided club members a way to be active within the political framework of their community, conducting surveys, facilitating debate, and making suggestions to the mayor's office on everything from long-term policy to the placement of playgrounds. In many ways, the City Club represented everything the GPU wanted to be— a well-established, well funded and reputable society that attracted the attention of many political bodies and pushed its interests forward in many local and state bureaucracies. And while the Gay People's Union never actually achieved a stature within the community as commanding as that of the City Club's, they did borrow what lobbying tactics from the

⁶ Shepard, Judy, and Jon Barrett. *The Meaning of Matthew: My Son's Murder in Laramie, and a World Transformed*. New York, NY: Hudson Street Press, 2009.

City Club that they could, and adopted many mannerisms and appearances to make themselves seem a more centrist, more mainstream body.

An important point to this thesis is the existence of connections and borrowed ideas between local, grassroots organizations— particularly between the City Club of Milwaukee and the Gay People's Union. Long before becoming the Wisconsin hub of GLBT rights, Milwaukee had to first become a different kind of city than the average Wisconsin urban center; it had to establish itself as a hub of forward-thought and progressivism. While it may seem unlikely that the actions taken by one organization only a few years after the turn of the 20th century could directly affect the formation and activities of another organization over half a century later, the plethora of progressive organizations that formed in Milwaukee around the turn of the century (one of the more successful of which was arguably the City Club) established Milwaukee as a city of forward-thought and social justice amongst all available venues in Wisconsin. As a successful Progressive organization, the City Club's existence was defined by making the city of Milwaukee a safer, less corrupt, and more socially just environment than it was before their existence. Furthermore, by the early 1970's, Milwaukee's reputation as an urban hub of progressive thought was strong enough to convince LGBT community members that Milwaukee was a good place to begin organizing themselves toward obtaining rights for themselves. The GPU was formed as a progressive group in a progressive city by members of a minority that was being mostly and intentionally ignored by existent progressive organizations. They formed themselves by borrowing as many organizing tactics as possible from already established groups, but were forced to improvise new methods of publicity due to the innate difference between themselves and previous progressive groups. They were not a group of middle-class reformists attempting to make life better for an oppressed or impoverished minority; they were a minority attempting to make life better for themselves.

It was into an environment of hate and discrimination at the tail end of the Civil Rights

Movement that the GPU was born into during the late 1960's and early 1970's. Having watched the oppression of African Americans in the American South and the American North be overturned by peaceful grassroots movements, GLBT people throughout the nation began becoming more assertive, starting businesses, frequenting bars and inns, and slowly bringing their identities into the disapproving light of the public's eye. By the time sparks of the movement were lit at the Stonewall Riots in New York City, GLBT people had established strong presences in many US cities and began forming activist groups for their own Gay Rights Movement, to establish equal rights for GLBT people everywhere. Starting in the early the 1970's, the sexuality of lesbian and gay people throughout Milwaukee underwent a fundamental shift from a fearfully guarded aspect of their lives into a more accepted, but still discriminated against source of a lifestyle. Grassroots community and student groups supportive of GLBT rights, like the GPU, formed and began pushing for the rights of their members. They did this by pursuing inter-group networking, organizational methods, and political agency that were consistent and comparable with those developed by progressive-era rights groups like the much older City Club of Milwaukee, while simultaneously developing a much more complex strategy for public outreach to help themselves obtain their vastly different goals.

The historiography of this comparison is a rather complicated one, namely because it is essentially a comparison of the two rather large and imposing topics of the Gay Rights Movement and Progressivism in Milwaukee, taking the form of a comparison between two organizations that were involved in their respective movements: the Gay People's Union, and the City Club of Milwaukee. Due to the extreme locality of the GPU, there are no academically-accepted secondary sources on the group readily available to this paper. However, authors have been writing about the gay rights movement since the early days of the 1980's, when the movement was still very much in its infancy. Some sources that provide summaries and give context for the nationwide effects of the gay rights movement, and are important arguments and narratives include *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation*

Movement by Margaret Cruikshank, and *The Unfinished Revolution*, by Stephen Engel. In her book, Cruikshank provides summarizations of several effects and facets of the GLBT “Liberation Movement,” (the name she assigned to the gay rights movement of the 1970's) and examines the movement in the contexts of being a “sexual” movement, a “political” movement, and of being a movement of “ideas.”⁷ *The Unfinished Revolution*, by Engel, is an important work that gives summaries of the complete history of GLBT people in both the United States and Great Britain, but is useful in particular to this project for its in-depth look at the effects of networking and interactions between groups advocating gay rights, and those fighting against them.⁸ While neither of these books deal specifically with the Gay People's Union, these sources do provide the best-supported descriptions and context of the nationwide movement in the United States, which is crucial to understanding the basic networking and goals of the GPU. There has been a great deal of change in how this subject is approached since the earlier sources arose as well. The earliest known secondary sources were published by persons competing over the issue in the political arena, like Anita Bryant. Sources like these are poorly referenced and seem like they would be better used in this project as primary sources related to the politics of the gay rights movement due to their use of firsthand information and non-scholarly research. Overall it is a chaotic field that requires careful attention to source reliability.⁹

This historiographical background for this paper also includes works on progressive era social rights organizations, to both provide information on the City Club of Milwaukee and context for the progressive era as a whole. Historians have been writing on and researching the Wisconsin Progressive movement for nearly a century; the era is typically marked as ending around the mid-1910's, and historical work on aspects of the movement began around that time as well. *The New Citizenship-*

⁷ Cruikshank, Margaret. *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement*. New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992.

⁸ Engel, Stephen M. *The Unfinished Revolution*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001.

⁹ Bryant, Anita. *At Any Cost*. New York, 1978.

*Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin*¹⁰ by David P. Thelen is a rather good piece to this topic that provides economic and social background for progressivism. Thelen's work states immediately in the preface that the economic depression of 1893 and the vast amount of unemployment that accompanied it were huge contributing factors to the uptake in popularity of progressive reform that happened around that year, and goes into a good deal of detail on those factors while also explaining some of the social motivations like women's inequality, unequal wages, and child labor. It later delves into the political side of the movement. Another indispensable piece is *The History of Wisconsin- The Progressive Era, 1893-1914*, by John D. Buenker. Buenker's work, a more recent book than Thelen's, looks at many socio-economic conditions throughout the state of Wisconsin, including race, culture, immigration, industrial manipulation and corruption, even going so far as to examine the mileage of sewers in the urban areas around Wisconsin before beginning to talk about La Follette and politics.¹¹ It appears that as time goes by, historians are including more and more ideas and effects of Progressive reform in their texts.

One source that provides good critical evidence is Roger R. Keeran's thesis "Milwaukee Reformers in the Progressive Era: The City Club of Milwaukee 1908–1922."¹² Keeran's thesis is an in-depth examination of the records of the Milwaukee City Club, the progressive reform group that will be compared to the GPU. Keeran's thesis on the City Club is a complete illustration of the City Club within the Wisconsin tradition of grassroots organizing for social and political change. The main argument put forth by Keeran in his thesis is that the City Club in Milwaukee was created to be a non-partisan reformist establishment when and where it was due to the "failure of previous reform efforts," and was organized internally in the form it was due to the "ideological orientation" it developed during

¹⁰ Thelen, David P. *The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism In Wisconsin 1885-1900*. Columbia: University of Missouri, 1972.

¹¹ Buenker, John D. *The History of Wisconsin IV: The Progressive Era 1893–1914*. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1998.

¹² Keeran, Roger R. "Milwaukee Reformers in the Progressive Era: The City Club of Milwaukee 1908–1922." Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1969.

its formation.¹³ His arguments are strong and sound, based on the solid evidence of the City Club's activities from the Milwaukee Journal and the Milwaukee Sentinel as well as minutes obtained from the club's records. Keeran establishes the club's "ideological orientation" quickly and conclusively by detailing speeches given by founding members of the club at conventions where the founders of the Milwaukee City Club were exposed to the successes of similar clubs in cities along the eastern seaboard. These speeches show the disdain the moderate reformers of the City Club felt for the politics of the city, and the rather radical political reforms that were pursued instead of more tangible and useful reforms that they believed would be useful for everybody in the city. Even by the day of its formation, Keeran seems to suggest that the City Club was already well-connected and networked with many clubs just like it throughout the country simply by the attendance of its members at nationwide reformist conventions and meetings. Furthermore, Keeran details why members of the City Club thought previous efforts at reform were failing: instead of attempting to educate the general public and create a "revived public conscience," they believed groups like the Voters' League were simply telling people how to vote around election time, and assumed that as long as they got the votes, the knowledge people had of their activities was much less important.¹⁴ He argues that the City Club of Milwaukee went about investing in educational pamphlets for the citizens of Milwaukee to allow them to at least achieve a basic understanding of the reform efforts going on, and that true reform could only come if the masses understood why things needed to be changed.¹⁵ This source is useful to this project's thesis due to its in-depth arguments about this previous grassroots organization, and its explanations as to how and why the City Club was organized the way it was. It provides an excellent source for comparison to the later Gay People's Union, which took the idea of public outreach developed by the City Club to an entirely new level.

¹³ Keeran, "Milwaukee Reformers," 16.

¹⁴ Keeran, "Milwaukee Reformers," 17.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Furthermore, by using archived newspapers, radio programs, advertisements, and articles of incorporation from the Gay People's Union, this paper will show that the GPU did indeed draw upon past influences to both make themselves more appealing to the mainstream public of the time and to further their push for the rights of homosexuals. Its members paid cheap, yearly dues, attended meetings, dances, conferences and shows sponsored by the group, and, in many cases, doubled as activists in almost any situation that necessitated one. Throughout its decade-long active existence, the GPU published a monthly newspaper, called the *Gay People's Union News*, and distributed it to their members and made copies available throughout the Milwaukee area. The paper credited itself as a “news-gathering service for the gay community,” and focused all of its stories either on activities, hobbies, or interest pieces on subjects relevant to the still-forming openly-gay culture within Milwaukee.¹⁶ The paper itself got lengthier as the decade wore on, an indication of the health of both the GPU as an organization and the gay community in Milwaukee as a whole; the paper initially started with only 12-page issues, but eventually grew to 52 pages near the end of the decade.¹⁷ By 1974, subscriptions to the paper were available yearly for \$5.00, and the paper was available for sale to anyone who wanted it for fifty cents per issue.¹⁸ The articles of incorporation are also an incredibly rich text, which provide a great deal of information on the internal setup of the GPU.¹⁹ Further resources that give an insight into the group include advertisements and the radio programs distributed by the GPU; both give some insight into the group's usage of different mediums to reach potential audiences with their message.²⁰ However, it is mostly through the *Gay People's Union News* archive that it is possible to determine the full extent of the public outreach of the GPU, the group's political agency, as well as how well the group was connected with other, similar groups throughout the city and

¹⁶ “Gay People's Union Publishes Newspaper.” *GPU News*, October, 1971. Milwaukee.

¹⁷ “12” *GPU News*, October, 1971. Milwaukee. and “52” *GPU News*, December, 1979. Milwaukee

¹⁸ “Everyone’s Doing It!” *GPU News*, October, 1974. Milwaukee

¹⁹ Brown, Howard G. *GPU Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation*. Milwaukee: Gay People's Union, 1972.

²⁰ Gay People's Union, prod. *Gay Perspective Radio Show*. 1971-1972.

the region, and the internal setup of the group.

Finally, the research process continued into the realms of archival boxes and newspaper archives of the City Club. The *City Club of Milwaukee Records, 1909–1977* archive proved to be an invaluable resource for basic information on the activities of the City Club. The City Club was formed in 1909 as a progressive civic club, and attracted many people from important positions throughout Milwaukee to its ranks, including several sitting judges, professors, and numerous doctorates.²¹ The club had a much steeper entrance fee than the GPU, presumably to ensure the quality and participation of its membership, and actually lobbied for state funding for some of its activities; as a result of this cumbersome membership fee, the City Club was comprised mostly by the financially secure and well-off.²² It was a well-established group of people in the Milwaukee area that busied themselves with attempting to find solutions to the problems they saw arising as a result of political and moral corruption. They did this by first organizing the club itself into committees and subcommittees in charge of certain reform efforts, based either on skill or on each member's interest.²³ Each of these subcommittees and committees held meetings on a regular basis—some weekly, others bi-weekly or monthly—and handwritten or typed minutes were kept of each of these meetings, which have proven themselves to be incredible resources on the internal structure and organization of the City Club itself, as well as how the Club wanted to be seen as a political entity. Furthermore, the newsletter archive reviewed is rich with evidence that supports the idea that the City Club did indeed at least attempt to reach out to the general public and educate them on how to basically be responsible citizens, though shows a much lesser degree of involvement than is evident in cases from the GPU.²⁴

²¹ “Committee Booklet,” located in 1913-1917 Folder. Box 1. *City Club of Milwaukee Records, 1909–1977*

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ City Club of Milwaukee. *City Club Bulletin* (Milwaukee), November 1915.

Political Agency

Perhaps the most important activities undertaken by both the Gay People's Union and the City Club of Milwaukee involved lobbying for the political interests of their respective members. Aside from being a civil rights group, the Gay People's Union faced a distinctive challenge that civil rights groups from other previous movements had not faced; the group of people they represented and worked for were defined as who they were by an act of love that was deemed to be unnatural "sodomy," which was expressively illegal in every single state in the United States at some point in the 20th century and carried a varying degree of penalties from state to state.²⁵ Representing a group that was forbidden from existence by state and local laws made the main purpose of the GPU easily recognizable: the legalization of homosexuality. So, in order to achieve this, or any other of their goals, the GPU had to sink a great deal of effort into lobbying elected officials and educating the public on the political positions of those running for office on the local, state, and federal levels.

The City Club also had many interests in being a political advocate, and was involved in local governmental functions on a scale never even touched by the GPU. The City Club had formed internal committees dedicated to determining the best ways to lobby the local government on many different topics, ranging from the Urban and Interurban Traffic committee to the Public Amusement and Morals committee.²⁶ Indeed, both the GPU and the City Club's existences were completely and totally seeped with political activism, and both organizations took their own political advocacy incredibly seriously as they lobbied local Milwaukee bureaucrats and politicians, state assemblymen and senators, and drummed up political support for their cause amongst the general public.

The City Club took a very broad and very direct approach at politics during its existence in early 20th century Milwaukee. Without having to face the fear of persecution and having a public that

²⁵ Painter, George. "The History of Sodomy Laws in the United States." Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. 2001. Accessed October 27, 2010. <http://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/usa/usa.htm>

²⁶ "Committee Booklet," located in 1913-1917 Folder. Box 1. *City Club of Milwaukee Records, 1909-1975*

was generally supportive of their decisions and actions, the City Club of Milwaukee had a much easier time lobbying local political bodies and pushing their agendas through to create actual city policy than the GPU. The early City Club was set up in a very efficient fashion to lobby and change city politics. Having the benefit of a large and influential membership, the City Club was able to break itself up into specified committees and sub-committees to focus in on very specific political issues, ranging from the implementation of daylight savings time in the city of Milwaukee to the establishment of a censorship board for motion pictures within the city.

A model for the political action of the City Club is the club's campaign to bring daylight savings time to the City of Milwaukee. This campaign started with a club-initiated study of the effects of DST in cities that had already established it as a policy inside the United States, and decided that they would like to see something like DST established in the city of Milwaukee.²⁷ After some debate, the club set up a committee to determine what would be the most effective way to make such a change into a city ordinance, knowing that the idea was voted down once already by the city council. After hearing their committee's suggestion to initiate a referendum by getting approximately 19,000 signatures on a petition, the club launched the campaign immediately. The petition was drafted in 1920, and was sent around to various businesses and industrial centers by various club members. Obtaining the signatures took the club a full year, but when the petition was filed with the city clerk in February of 1921, it was filled with 33,432 signatures. Having had the referendum brought, the City Club then began investing large sums of club money into advertising for the referendum, and spent a total of \$1469.82 on post cards, leaflets, and newspaper ads. The referendum was carried out by a majority vote later that year.

On the other hand, the GPU was a group devoted to the well-being and furtherance of GLBT rights, an issue that carried with it an inescapable social stigma that defined anyone that identified as LGBT in unflattering and offensive terminology. The incredible difference in the amount of

²⁷ "Daylight Savings Time." Folder 7. Box 6. *City Club of Milwaukee Records, 1909-1975*

controversy surrounding these two organizations was a huge factor in limiting the political effectiveness of the GPU. In addition to being a much more mainstream organization than the GPU, the City Club was also much larger in terms of membership, and much better funded than the GPU. Normal members of the City Club were typically from the upper echelons of society, and were a generally well-connected group of people inside of Milwaukee society.²⁸ The founding membership of the GPU, however, consisted chiefly of GLBT people and college students, and generally had little experience affecting the outcomes of any sort of political decision.²⁹ Furthermore, given that the City Club had much more diversified political interests than the GPU, it is hard to imagine any situation where any organization as single-minded as the GPU could come close to matching the political efficacy of the City Club.

One of the biggest problems facing the GPU in its efforts to create a homosexual-friendly Milwaukee during the club's youth was an utter lack of politicians in any level of government that supported GLBT rights openly. They first set about changing this by appealing to the public's sense of morality through education as well as by directly lobbying governmental officials. Indeed, when the GPU formed in its primordial form as the GLO (Gay Liberation Organization) in 1969, Richard M. Nixon was the President of the United States, and both the bureaucracy of the city of Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin itself were intentionally inhospitable to openly GLBT peoples.³⁰ The GPU knew that in order to realistically have any political pull within the city, they would have to establish either an incredibly large membership or begin to create a public sympathetic to their causes, essentially making their entire public outreach effort double as an effort of political efficacy. The GPU began publishing a newspaper even before their official organization as the GPU; they published their "Take

²⁸ Keeran, "Milwaukee Reformers," 43.

²⁹ UW-Digital Collections Staff. "GPU Collection Abstract." Accessed December 9, 2010. <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/GPU/GPUHome.html>.

³⁰ Q, T. P. "Police Vs. Gays: Crisis in Understanding." *GPU News* (Milwaukee), September 1972

Heed” newsletter and distributed the first five issues prior to its reorganization into an official newspaper for free.³¹ Seemingly much more like political propaganda than an actual newspaper, “Take Heed” often tells of misdeeds against the local GLBT community in its articles. “We're through with police harassing our bars, looking for pay-offs,”—the GPU was doing more than complaining about politically-motivated arrests by printing and distributing this in leaflet-like newsletters around the city of Milwaukee.³² They were making their first impressions upon what was then an electorate in a state of flux on many social issues pertaining to civil rights, and they were not making that first impression in any uncertain terms.

The GPU used their newspaper in more practical ways to promote their political goals as well. As early as February of 1972, the Gay People's Union sent free issues of *GPU News* to the office addresses of state assemblymen and senators, presumably in an effort to embed their group's name in the minds of Wisconsin's legislative figures.³³ Actions such as these—the sending of letters and fliers to State and United States Congressmen—while crude, are direct lobbying tactics that are and have been available and used by citizens and lobbying groups throughout American history. However, due to the ineffectiveness of such a tactics at achieving actual substantive political reform, and the hostile political climate towards LGBT issues at the time, the GPU must have been merely hoping to start the discussion on gay rights in the state by sending these papers to congressmen. Even early on in the organization's existence, the members of the GPU saw that the political fight for equality would not come to a swift conclusion, or for that matter even begin in a timely fashion without a catalyst.

The GPU began the discussion by forcing the issue into the minds of politicians and citizens alike, and began to doggedly pursue and report the voting patterns and stated positions of candidates in

³¹ Gay People's Union. *Take Heed* 1 (August 6, 1970).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *GPU News* (Milwaukee). "GPU January Accomplishments." February 1972.

their newspaper, while increasingly urging their membership and the readers of their paper to vote in nearly every election. The GPU first took baby steps into their role as the political agent for the GLBT community for the general Milwaukee area by encouraging its membership and the readers of its newspaper to write to their state assemblymen and congressmen to support either reforming or repealing statutes that were oppressive and demeaning, generally a tactic that at best only raises the issue in the heads of a select few legislators in Madison.³⁴ But the GPU began taking larger strides in its role as a political agency by focusing on the city of Milwaukee itself, first by sending out “questionnaires” to aldermanic candidates in an upcoming election in 1972.³⁵ This continued when they stepped up their campaigning even more later that year by exposing police abuses specifically targeted against the GLBT population through a series of interviews with the Detective in charge of the special Milwaukee “vice” police force—the very force in charge of regulating and arresting homosexuals for being homosexual.³⁶ These very early, confrontational tactics were hardly designed to be legitimate attempts to change policy, and were seemingly meant to garner sympathy for GLBT peoples by appealing to the population at large. By exposing harsh and repressive police policies, the GPU was creating an image in the public eye showing GLBT people to be a truly repressed people, forced to lead life fearful of corrupt city and state politics and an overzealous police force. As with all truly grassroots organizations, the political agency of the GPU started with the garnering of support amongst the general population of their home district.

Eventually, the GPU began turning to tactics that are more commonly associated with a political movement. By June of 1976, the group had experienced its share of small-scale successes, along with its share of failures in the form of GPU-supported reform bills in the state legislative houses.³⁷ One

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *GPU News* (Milwaukee). "GPU January Accomplishments." February 1972.

³⁶ Q, T. P. "Police Vs. Gays: Crisis in Understanding." *GPU News* (Milwaukee), September 1972.

³⁷ *GPU News* (Milwaukee). "Hearing Held on Sex Law Reform." April 1972.

major step the GPU took to help make itself involved in an organized push for GLBT rights reform in Wisconsin was in its attendance of a gay “symposium,” that was held in Madison with the goal of creating a GLBT lobbying group that would personally lobby state senators and assemblymen on bills related to GLBT issues.³⁸ In addition to simple lobbying, this GLBT lobbying committee was going to “...focus its efforts on one or two legislative races for either the state assembly or the state senate, in order to demonstrate the strength of the gay vote.”³⁹ The step taken at this “con-fab” was an important step for the GPU as part of the state movement to legalize homosexuality, as it focused the reform effort in Madison by combining the resources of multiple LGBT rights groups and lobbying the State in a way the GPU could never hope to do on their own. Also, the lobby group was in a much better position to understand the political viewpoints of specific state legislators and knew better which senators and assemblymen would be more or less receptive to letters and encouragement than others. Already by 1977 there were reform bills in the Assembly that were being supported by the newly-formed GLBT lobbying group. Despite the fact that the repeal of the sodomy law in Wisconsin did not take place until 1983, the transformation of the Gay Rights Movement in Wisconsin from an entirely local grassroots movement into an organized political movement was already complete, and was working for the interests of GLBT people statewide from within the capitol itself.⁴⁰

However, the City Club does represent the type of political organization the GPU was trying to emulate. The actions taken by the GPU early on in its career as a political agent suggest that they understood just how isolated they were, and knew that in order to have any sort of political pull, they needed to establish a safe zone for themselves as a GLBT rights organization and create a population that was sympathetic to their plight. If the GPU would have simply jumped into the political machinery and attempted to do anything akin to the daylight savings time campaign of the City Club,

³⁸ GPU Staff. "Symposium: Gays and the Law." *GPU News* (Milwaukee), June 1976.

³⁹ Hess, Alyn. "Confab Sparks State Lobby." *GPU News* (Milwaukee), July 1976.

⁴⁰ GPU Staff. "New Gay Rights Bill in Congress." *GPU News* (Milwaukee), February 1977.

they would have found themselves with an incredibly short petition, an exhausted membership from the time-consuming work of preparing a referendum, and with penniless coffers to top it off. While the early GPU did involve itself in some political activities akin to that of the City Club—interviewing alderman candidates for their position on gay rights and sending free copies of their newspapers to every single state assemblymen and senators—these tactics were not directly meant to push any agenda but rather to nurse the GPU's burgeoning political power. The single most powerful thing the GPU could carry over themselves from the City Club was advertising their plight: they published a newspaper, made themselves publicly visible, and invited those that disagreed with their right to equality to speak and debate with them. The GPU made up for their lack of social connections, funding, and social acceptance with sheer exposure; this exposure slowly but surely nourished a hospitable space them to grow.

Finally, the City Club was a much more effective organization than the Gay People's Union, but the GPU was outdone by the City Club only due to the popularity and less controversial nature of many of their reforms. One of the most prolifically repeating subjects seen throughout the 10-year-long publication of *GPU News* is the issue of religious intolerance of GLBT people, especially in the context of criticizing certain Christian sects on their discrimination towards gays and lesbians.⁴¹ This was almost the exact opposite of the very religious City Club, an organization whose average member belonged to “one of the New England churches,” and had members who were the leaders of said churches.⁴² While being affiliated and accepted by organized religions does not necessarily dictate the politics of any one group, the very fact that the City Club could be a sampling of many major Christian sects shows that they were in the political mainstream, and that they were in no way representing something anywhere near controversial enough to garner religious discrimination.

⁴¹ GPU Staff. "Gay Lutherans get \$2000 Grant." *GPU News* (Milwaukee), July 1974.

⁴² Keeran, "Milwaukee Reformers," 45.

Internal Organization and Power Structure

One of the biggest sources of commonality between the Gay People's Union and the City Club of Milwaukee are the internal power structure of the two organizations, where internal organization is defined as being anything to do with the internal political setup, operations, and policies of a group. While the two groups did not share explicitly common goals, there were a great deal about their respective internal setups that was similar. The City Club of Milwaukee was set up in 1908 in the midst of a locally-popular progressive reformist movement, and provides a pristine model of club power structures from the progressive era. One of the first things the City Club had to achieve before they could begin to actually work on reform in the outside community was establish itself as a corporation, and to this end the club adopted an already-established democratic template for organizing themselves that provided them with an accepted and mainstream framework for conducting their activities. This power structure, by being a democratic and recognizable form used by many clubs and organizations from throughout American history, was also adopted later by the GPU. The quick formation of a familiar, democratic structure filled with familiar offices that follows recognizable rules and met regularly in familiar places at socially-acceptable times must be viewed as an intentional and conscious decision made by the GPU. The internal power structure of the GPU as a corporation followed the model put to use and demonstrated by the City Club of Milwaukee in order to create themselves in as mainstream an image as possible, and to help nurture the idea within the Milwaukee community that the GPU was a mainstream organization representing mainstream people.

After first being organized in 1908, the City Club of Milwaukee was set up internally in a very member-friendly and democratic way. Formed as a club dedicated to

...secure a closer union and co-operation among citizens who sincerely desire to study municipal affairs, acquire and disseminate accurate information concerning the same, and generally to promote in a practical

and effective way, better social, civic and economic conditions; the City Club was designed to be a democratic institution.⁴³ As laid out in its Articles of Incorporation, the club was run by five officers who held named offices—a “President, a First Vice-President, a Second Vice-President, a Secretary, and a Treasurer,” and had the ability to create offices for other officers should the need arise.⁴⁴ The duties of each of these officers was mainly operational and included presiding over general membership meetings, taking minutes, and collecting dues.⁴⁵ The City Club also had a board of nine directors that held a “general charge of the affairs, funds and property of the corporation;” and were answerable only to the general membership of the club.⁴⁶ Also included in the City Club's Articles of Incorporation was a method to amend the Articles of Incorporation itself— namely, a vote put to the club membership that received more than a 1/5th vote of the membership. Overall, the club's internal setup is a prime example of an effective and malleable democratic club setup, designed for both transparency and efficiency, and is basically one of the most universal setups for clubs and organizations straight through to the present.

The internal setup and political structure of the Gay People’s Union was also very democratic, and it was set-up by its own Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation just like those of the City Club. First incorporated in December of 1972, the GPU adopted a democratic setup that was entirely subject to the votes of that groups membership.⁴⁷ Membership in the club was defined as consisting of adults that attended three or more meetings, and paid the club's annual \$2.00 dues, and membership gave people the right to one vote in any election held for one of the positions within the club.⁴⁸ The GPU's internal

⁴³ Mock, Fernando C., William J. Desmond, Albert W. Hard, Samuel Hirshberg, Silas Y. Gillan, Kenneth G. Smith, and Carl D. Thompson. "Articles of Incorporation of the City Club of Milwaukee." 1908. MS, Universtiy of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

⁴⁴ “Fourth” "Articles of Incorporation of the City Club of Milwaukee." 1908. Universtiy of Wisconsin Milwaukee.

⁴⁵ “Fifth” "Articles of Incorporation of the City Club of Milwaukee." 1908. Universtiy of Wisconsin Milwaukee

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Brown, Howard G. "Gay People's Union Inc. Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation," 1972. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

setup consisted of several named elected positions- a President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer, each of whom was elected yearly. It also included an elected Board of Directors that consisted of five members of the GPU, each of whom served 2 year terms.⁴⁹ The elected officers of the group took on special duties mostly related to the efficient running of the GPU as an organization, while the Board of Directors held the power to decide the "...affairs of the corporation."⁵⁰ Elections for the GPU began at the November member meeting each year, during which all nominees for all Board of Director positions had to declare their intention to run for their respective offices. Elections for board members were carried out during the December meeting each year, via ballot voting, and Officer elections were carried out in January of each year, and special elections were required to be held whenever an officer or board member stepped down or was removed from their post.

One major difference between the Articles of Incorporation of the GPU and those of the City Club was that the GPU stresses that the meetings were not simply limited to GPU members- "All meetings of the members shall be open to the public," while no such stress existed in the City Club.⁵¹ This major difference between the two organizations is a sign of just how different the issues being faced by each organization were. The City Club was a mainstream progressive organization devoted to reforms that were, for the most part, supported by a large number of people. Wide public support was almost a given for many of their reform activities, like the construction of new playgrounds and the investment of tens of thousands of dollars into street lighting for the city.⁵²

Moreover, the GPU was an organization that did not enjoy as much public support for their activities due to the social bigotry towards LGBT people that existed at the time, and where the City Club saw public support to be a necessary part of their various reform campaigns, it was not viewed as

⁴⁹ Brown. "Gay People's Union Inc. Bylaws " UW-Milwaukee. 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² City Club Staff. "Street Lighting." "3rd Ward Playground." *City Club Bulletin* (Milwaukee), March 1916.

an absolutely crucial part of the Club's very survival as an organization. The 1970's political environment the GPU existed in forced that group to make itself so accessible and transparent to the public that they included in their Articles of Incorporation- the founding documents of their group, that the general public was to be allowed into any membership meeting they chose to attend, and that all it took for a member of the community to become a full-fledged member was their attendance of three or more meetings and \$2.00 yearly in dues. The GPU understood that it would never be successful in attaining its goals, or even survive as an organization without establishing some sort of foothold for themselves in the social sphere of Milwaukee.

In addition to the newly established policies and politics of both clubs and their memberships, politics local to the time-place of both the City Club of Milwaukee and the Gay People's Union affected the internal politics of both groups. Political appearance seemed to be an incredibly important issue to the City Club immediately and for some time after its organization as a club. Born into a political climate where some conservative politicians associated the idea of the City Club to being a "...Socialist trick," the group found itself in a situation where it needed to establish itself as a both a progressive reform organization and as an organization that was against radical reforms.⁵³ This view was eradicated with the election of John A. Butler, a "mugwump," or a party-crossing reformist, to the presidency of the group in its first round of elections.⁵⁴ By electing a reformist who identified politically with the conservative party, the City Club solidified itself as a mainstream organization that was interested in reform, but only if said reform was proven to not be terribly disadvantageous to the status-quo. The problem for the GPU was slightly different than that faced by the City Club—their position within the social confines of Milwaukee had already been decided by their choice to support the rights of LGBT people throughout the state. While they were obviously working extremely hard to

⁵³ Keeran, Roger R. "Milwaukee Reformers in the Progressive Era: The City Club of Milwaukee, 1908-1922." Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1969. 20.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

change the social stigma that surrounded gay people and their rights, they also needed to connect themselves into what was rapidly becoming a national movement for the equality of GLBT people, and establish themselves as a force legitimately interested in the attainment of LGBT rights. To achieve these goals, the GPU used the same tactic as the City Club. They appointed a man by the name of Eldon Murray, an established, locally-known and out-of-the-closet gay man that had been pushing for the establishment of a local GLBT-rights group for many years to the first Board of Directors in 1972.⁵⁵ Electing Eldon Murray to the Board of Directors, an important office with the longest term assigned to any within the GPU, was a definitive, concreting action for their position as a champion for LGBT rights in Milwaukee and throughout Wisconsin.

The adoption of a mainstream political model for the setup of their organization brought the GPU one rather obvious advantage: it made them more mainstream to 1970's Milwaukee. Ignoring everything else about the group, from its political activities to its overall goals, and focusing entirely on the setup of the GPU as an organization, one comes to the conclusion that it was set up just like every other mainstream club in the history of Milwaukee and Wisconsin. The group collected annual dues from members to meet the basic costs of keeping the group running, had regular monthly meetings that met at normal hours at official locations, and held events designed to propagate itself throughout the Milwaukee metropolitan area. The GPU keeping with this established and well-practiced model reasonably proves that the group did use past precedents to help them establish themselves in the area, and that the group did not desire to be seen as radical by the general Milwaukee community. The adoption of this setup immediately helped further the goal of the GPU of making gay rights more mainstream in the eyes of the Milwaukee public, simply by bringing the group to the public forum and allowing it the same opportunities it offered groups since the progressive era.

⁵⁵ "1947-1965" Box 1, Folder 6. Eldon Murray. *Eldon Murray Collection*. Milwaukee. UW-Milwaukee Archives.

Establishing Connections and Networking

In an era dominated by social networking websites, cell phones, and instant messaging, the definition of the word and the ease of the action “networking,” is as fluid the changing culture and ever-evolving technology. Prior to the advent of technologies that allowed for lightning-fast world-wide communication, networking took on a different meaning, and networked connections were oftentimes a much pricier commodity than what they have evolved into by 2010. Civic clubs and organizations in reform-era Milwaukee, like the City Club, found themselves devoted to bringing reform to corrupted sectors in both government and public life through the use of many processes that are nowadays considered archaic in order to establish effective working conditions. As a result, it was common for different groups throughout the city to be brought together and to network themselves through innovative techniques in order to make their efforts at reforming the city more effective. The City Club excelled in establishing networking throughout the community and partook in reform often through use of effective networking skills like recruiting members from other clubs and combining resources with neighboring reform groups whenever it was evident such a move would help them succeed in achieving a goal

This is another area where the Gay People's Union attempted as much as they possibly could to copy the model set by the City Club, but were hampered by the large majority of people opposed to them. While the Gay People's Union was able to more easily establish ties with other groups due to the widespread use of technological innovations like the telephone and the photocopier, social circumstances did not allow them to network to anywhere near as large a number of groups or individuals that the City Club had. The GPU still copied some of the basic principles from them, however, like recruiting members of relatively high social status in the community and eventually from other, similar clubs while setting up its own external network. The vast majority of gay rights

organizations were just getting off the ground in the early 1970's, and establishing networks with similar organizations obviously could not happen until other groups had properly formed. The GPU did eventually establish ties with variant groups and individuals that shared the GPU's interests throughout the city of Milwaukee, the state of Wisconsin, and indeed in other states throughout the Midwest, but having arrived on the scene so early in 1970, the GPU found itself in more of an organizational vacuum than the City Club. The GPU's network connections were functional in purpose, as widespread as possible for a gay rights group operating in an unfriendly environment, and were established to make the political and public environments around the GPU more hospitable for the advancement of the rights of LGBT people.

Establishing connections with other reform groups was an activity of high importance to the City Club, and they worked to create connections in as many ways as possible despite the now tediously archaic means by which these connections were made. The easiest and fastest way of establishing an effective network between the City Club and a governmental, societal, or progressive reform groups was for the City Club to recruit members of these groups into their ranks. As evidenced by the number of members of the club that held positions in such groups, the club either pursued this course aggressively, or was an attractive club for citizens in such positions to join; insiders like lawyer, municipal court judges, and professors, and the knowledge that invariably came with such professionals on the workings of their fields, must have brought the club invaluable support as it continued to expand its organizational network.⁵⁶ Another way the City Club established networking connections was through correspondence. At any given time, the Civic Secretary of the City Club kept a large number of correspondences going not only with other reform groups, but with various people who held positions that affected issues the City Club was interested in, like school principals and

⁵⁶ Civic Secretary . *All Committees (members)*. 1917. Box 1, Folder 1. City Club of Milwaukee Records. Milwaukee.

school board members.⁵⁷ Correspondences were a staple in that they allowed the club to establish who would support them in their reform efforts from beyond the range of an quick visit from a club member, and in that they kept each party involved apprised of the intentions of each other. They allowed for combined action on the part of the corresponding groups, as well as any decisions that may have brought about an end to official relations to be communicated and coordinated, and indeed formed the backbone of traceable networking conducted by the early City Club.

Networking with other reform groups offered the City Club a good amount of assistance when pushing their agenda of reform through political processes and during times when their political stances were under debate. One example of a political victory the City Club helped achieve with the help of other organizations it networked with was their push for the creation of a censorship board to censor “objectionable” material from moving pictures in theaters around Milwaukee.⁵⁸ This issue apparently caused enough social strife to attract the attention of the City Club quickly as movie houses around Milwaukee were freely showing moving pictures that were unconstrained by moral legislation or supervision. The City Club decided to directly take on the issue when a film “My Neighbors Wife,” was shown at a local movie house, and offended the Civic Secretary of the organization.⁵⁹ After some political debate within the City Club and presumably within its cooperating counterparts, it was decided that a board be appointed by the mayor, and that this “non-partisan board” of seven members be tasked with suggesting the censorship of profanity, nudity, and anything else it found to be morally objectionable from a moving picture to the mayor, who had the right to revoke the license of any movie house that failed to cooperate with the censor.⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, the people that sat on this non-partisan board were the same people who pushed for its creation in the first place; members of the City

⁵⁷ Civic Secretary. *Public Education Correspondences*. 1917. Box 3, Folder 2. City Club of Milwaukee Records. Milwaukee.

⁵⁸ Civic Secretary. *Moving Pictures, 1914-1917*. 1917. Box 2, Folder 6. City Club of Milwaukee Records. Milwaukee.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Club, the Rotary Club of Milwaukee, and other reform groups (as well as representatives from the Fire and Police departments) were appointed to the board by the mayor.⁶¹ This positive outcome for the City Club was only made possible by their shrewd use political connections within the established network between the City Club and the other local reform groups like the Rotary Club. Additionally, this network helped make the censoring of what the City Club considered immoral movie material a much easier thing to agree upon once representatives of groups that held the generally same code on what was “objectionable” were appointed to the board.⁶² Networks established with like-minded groups prior to the successful creation of the censorship board created conditions where the City Club could more efficiently project their ideologies onto incoming “objectionable” films, and indeed made the City Club a much more formidable reformist organization than it would be without its networked connections.

Later, during the early 1970's, the Gay People's Union had a much harder time creating an effective network with other, similar groups than the City Club did. Instead of being able to simply align itself with other large, established LGBT rights groups in the area, the GPU was forced itself to take the initial baby-steps toward actually organizing a network from an environment of rather comparative isolation. The GPU was a pioneer in Milwaukee for the rights of LGBT people; for months, the only indication that the GPU was attempting to establish connections with other LGBT groups were tiny news bits such as “received communications from other gay lib groups and people trying to form new groups,” within GPU NEWS indicating that it had been establishing and keeping up with correspondences with various other groups. Indeed, these mini-articles did not even specify to whom these correspondences were being sent.⁶³ The Gay People Union's first real attempt at

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ GPU News Staff. "G.P.U. Aug-Sept Accomplishments." *GPU News* [Milwaukee] Oct. 1971: 2. Print.

establishing a network was the Midwest Homophile Conference.⁶⁴ This conference was a gathering of GLBT people, supporters, and representatives of groups from throughout the Midwest that was designed to both bring people that identified as homosexual together and spread ideas and the GPU's organizing techniques to those that were in attendance.⁶⁵ Eventually, the GPU grew into both a better-established and better-connected part of the LGBT rights movement in Wisconsin as more and more rights groups formed, and its network grew accordingly as the GPU influenced the creation of both state and national lobbying groups, sent free copies of their newspaper to groups throughout the country, and successfully established contacts with members of the political machinery of the Milwaukee area.

Additionally, the GPU's networking skills were focused in a much different way than those of the City Club. Where the City Club attempted to use their influence to directly gain political victories, the GPU used what influence they had to attempt to further endear themselves to the community at large as opposed to the government. For example, a dispute in July of 1972 between a local Milwaukee gay bar and a smaller, more leftist gay liberation group- called the "New Gay Underground," became so heated that the New Gay Underground decided to strike and not allow patrons into the bar.⁶⁶ The GPU was called upon by the bar owners to negotiate with the smaller group, and after the intervention of the GPU, the situation was quickly resolved.⁶⁷ Establishing themselves as a moderate force for gay rights was an important goal for the GPU, and mediating situations like this helped create them in the eyes of Milwaukee as being a more centrist organization, dedicated to reform only in a peaceful manner. Swaying public opinion to their cause was always at the forefront of their minds, and any opportunity to appear moderate was undoubtedly seen as a great opportunity for the

⁶⁴ GPU News Staff. "G.P.U. Makes Milwaukee History." *GPU News*, Milwaukee. May-June 1972.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ GPU News Staff. "Racism, Sexism Denied." *GPU News*, Milwaukee. July 1972.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

GPU to sway the minds of the general public. They were networking on multiple levels at once; by mediating the conflict, the GPU found a new friend in the owner of the bar that was being subjected to the strike, as well as earned that little bit extra respect in the eyes of the general public for being able to successfully mediate a potentially violent situation. For the GPU, the public's opinion meant everything.

Public Outreach

Public outreach is an activity both the City Club of Milwaukee and the Gay People's Union both took extremely seriously in the context of their time periods and compared to other organizations of their day. The City Club of Milwaukee was born at the end of an era of heavy industrialism and corrupt political machinery in Milwaukee, a time in which only the elite and the new middle class had enough time to particularly do anything not directly related to a job or to the maintenance of their daily existence. To the City Club in the early 20th century, the public was understood to be both a tool for political campaigns and to be an instrument to gauge either the success and popularity, or the lack thereof, of their policies. However, the approval of the general population outside the clubhouse doors was never seen as an absolutely fundamental to their success as a club. Over half a century later, the Gay People's Union saw the public in a much different light. To a civil rights organization whose sole purpose was the attaining of recognition and rights for a group of people who were generally seen as miscreants and perverts by the general population, the education and conversion of the general public to their cause was indeed absolutely crucial to the accomplishment of their goals. The GPU was almost forced by the social standing of their membership to focus themselves on including the public in their doings to a degree rarely if ever seen in private organizations. The GPU and the City Club were appealing to different audiences: where the GPU was interested in converting the majority of the Milwaukee population to a point of view that did not define homosexuality as a negative, the City Club

was targeting a very select middle class that had an active interest in reforming their community to make it a more efficient and moral environment. So while these two organizations did not take public outreach on in exactly similar manners, the discrepancies in how they approached this topic are direct results of the differences in their memberships and goals, in addition to how well each of the groups were accepted into the community at large.

One of the main reasons these organizations took varying levels of interest in including the public in their proceedings was how integrated into the public sphere the membership of each of the organizations were. In 1908 Milwaukee, the membership of City Club overrepresented the upper middle class quite heavily, as their membership fees were rather high for a club, even by today's standards.⁶⁸ An obvious outcome of this high entrance fee to the club was a preemptive selection process that ensured a rather homogenous group of people: people wealthy enough to commit time to the club, spend money on its fees, and have enough of an interest in local politics and reform to cause them to join in the first place. The membership of the City Club was not made up of social outcasts; it was comprised almost entirely well-off, white, 70% male Christians who were dissatisfied with the political workings of the city- about as socially-acceptable a group of people as can be arranged into an organization as possible.⁶⁹

While the City Club prided itself on its dedication to including and educating the public about its activities, the policies it adopted for general practice and campaigning seem to paint a picture of the City Club being involved to a much lesser extent within the community than other, later clubs, that were a part of the progressive tradition. Full membership meetings for the City Club were relatively rare, as the majority of the meetings held in the City Club were those of the sub-committees that members were encouraged (and sometimes assigned) to join, which were usually closed to the public.

⁶⁸ "Tax and Employment, 1934-1959" Folder. Box 91. *City Club of Milwaukee Records, 1909-1975*

⁶⁹ Statistic as of 1934. "Women's Group, 1934-1941" Folder. Box 91, *City Club of Milwaukee Records, 1909-1975*

The most transparent the City Club became to non-members seemed to be through allowing members to bring a “guest,” to any of the club-organized events as they desired, though these would have rarely been general club meetings; it was not in the norm for the public to be in attendance of Club meetings.⁷⁰ The club seemed to go out of its way to bring in guest lecturers and talkers based on the interests of its membership, but it never once brought in a lecturer for a talk that was open to the general public.⁷¹ While this is in no way unusual, it is indicative that the Club's did not see entertaining and educating the public to be as important as educating and entertaining its membership. Moreover, the City Club did in fact publish a monthly newsletter not unlike GPU News for almost a decade during its earlier years of existence.⁷²

Oftentimes, a newspaper is an indicator that a club is attempting to branch out and educate the community about themselves and of their progress and doings as a group. However, this newspaper seems more designed to be still another benefit mostly members only- the majority of the papers talk in language indicative that it is only meant to be distributed and read by City Club members, not by the general public. So despite its goal “...to educate public sentiment along civil lines,” the City Club Bulletin (later the City Club News) was not an incredibly effective tool for public outreach due to its use of self-patronizing language and lack of any journalism that was unrelated to the actions of the City Club.⁷³ Its inclusive language and a seeming assumption by the authors of the newspaper that all of their reform efforts were for the good of every citizen in Milwaukee give it a feel more consistent with an internal memo than a document meant to be seen by large portions of the general public.

The largest extent to which the City Club did deal with the general public was generally to inform them about civic matters during and before elections or referendums. The City Club was an

⁷⁰ “University Lectures, 1922-1925” Folder 3, Box 91. *City Club of Milwaukee Records*, 1909-1975

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² City Club Staff. *City Club Bulletin* (Milwaukee), November 1915.

⁷³ Achievements and Purposes. “Bulletin (club activities), 1915-1917,” Folder 5, Box 1, *City Club of Milwaukee Records*, 1909-1975.

effective civic club, as it not only pushed reform bills through the city political mechanisms, but it also helped organize successful referendums and push bills through the state legislature.⁷⁴ When necessary, the City Club did print off political leaflets, buy newspaper space in more commonly-circulated local newspapers, and send its membership out to attempt to sway the general public to vote for their referendum proposals.⁷⁵ An example of the City Club reaching outside of its normal comfort zone audience of the upper middle class for a more general audience of the general Milwaukee electorate was their campaign to bring daylight savings time to Milwaukee. That campaign was one of door-to-door, newspaper, and workplace campaigning by City Club members and by members of other organizations allied for this cause from all over Milwaukee. Overall, the City Club was interested in the well-being and education of the public, but they certainly did not feel that as an organization they were in dire need of the general public's support.

On the other hand, the Gay People's Union was made up of a group of people that have time and again been seen as incredibly controversial group- gay people. Throughout the entire course of American history up until the 1970's (and still afterward), with very few exceptions, LGBT people were a cause of community-wide controversy and were generally discriminated against or cast out of social circles for their unseemly differences in sexual preference, attitude, and appearances. The Gay People's Union's main goal and mission was to gain both political and community recognition for the plight of LGBT peoples within Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin.⁷⁶ However, they were attempting to achieve this in a time-place where the general public was not a friendly force to any person that identified under one of the LGBT banners, and in order to obtain both of these goals, both the GPU and indeed the entirety of the Gay Rights Movement were eventually going to need one thing

⁷⁴ Keeran, Roger R. "Milwaukee Reformers in the Progressive Era: The City Club of Milwaukee, 1908-1922." Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1969. 59.

⁷⁵ Booklet. "Daylight Savings Time," Folder, Box 6, *City Club of Milwaukee Records*, 1909-1975.

⁷⁶ Brown, Howard G. "Gay People's Union Inc. Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation." 1972. MS, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee. 1.

from the public: support.

The GPU decided it would attempt to tackle this looming problem in as direct a fashion as possible- by making themselves as open and available to the public as possible. Starting even with the bylaws of its corporation, the GPU lays out clearly that it will available for public examination. “All meetings of members shall be open to the public.”⁷⁷ In fact, the GPU went so far as to allow anyone who was even “interested” in their cause to sit in on their membership meetings three times before asking them to officially join and begin paying the comparatively (to the City Club's monthly \$11.00 dues) cheap \$2.00 dues yearly.⁷⁸ Being this open to the public was an adaption from the model represented by the City Club that is incredibly important in defining the GPU. The GPU wanted members of the public to attend their meetings, or at the very least they wanted to put forth the image of complete transparency. Allowing members of the general public to attend their meetings would be advantageous to them as a demonstration that they were not secretive at all— they were willing to allow people to attend their meetings for free, and in fact they wanted very much for people to see that they did not live up to the horrible and offensive stereotype assigned to GLBT people by those scared of their differences. The only way for them to realistically combat the well-established social conventions about homosexuals was to show the people that harbored those conventions directly that they were not truth.

The Gay People's Union newspaper, GPU News, is another item that shows just how heavily the GPU desired to be perceived in a favorable light by the general population of Milwaukee. Sold throughout the city for a mere \$0.30 an issue, GPU News was a readily available source of information not only for GLBT people, but also anyone interested enough to part with a quarter and a nickel.⁷⁹ The

⁷⁷ Brown “Bylaws,” 3.

⁷⁸ City Club statistic as of 1934. “Tax and Employment, 1934-1941” Folder 2. Box 91, *City Club of Milwaukee Records, 1909-1975*. GPU statistic as of 1973. GPU News Staff. “Subscription Request.” *GPU News* (Milwaukee), August 1973.

⁷⁹ GPU News Staff. “\$0.30.” *GPU News* (Milwaukee), September 1973. Price of the newspaper increased later in the

front page of this newspaper often highlighted some form of injustice members of the LGBT community were faced with throughout Milwaukee: be it dishonorable discharges from the US military, illegal police entrapment policies, or the inability of LGBT people to even meet in a bar or tavern without fear of becoming targeted by either bigots or overzealous police. The newspaper was published in monthly installments, and tended to get longer as time went on, an indication that the readership of the paper grew during its publication.⁸⁰ GPU News was an attempt made by the GPU to further garner support for LGBT people by keeping the public apprised on the activities and the goals of the GPU itself. Furthermore, while it was a newspaper dedicated to obtaining rights for homosexuals, GPU News explored a great deal more than simply the issues surrounding the sexuality of its membership. It oftentimes included a sections devoted to poetry and food recipes, and included areas for “letters to the editor,” so that readers could write their opinions and complaints and have them heard by the rest of the community.⁸¹ Including articles like food recipes and poetry toned down the newspaper from being an entirely single-issue driven compilation to being a more moderate and approachable type of print source to any person not directly associated with or familiar with LGBT issues. GPU News was just as much a tool for community outreach as it was a source of information on GLBT happenings to the GPU during its early existence.

In addition to the newspaper, the GPU sponsored a weekly radio show named “Gay Perspective,” that was played throughout the greater Milwaukee area and addressed different topics pertaining to gay life and culture each week, as well as played music and advertisements.⁸² Gay Perspective failed relatively quickly and miserably as a radio show due to its being “...too educational

decade, coinciding with increases in length.

⁸⁰ “GPU News, 1971-1981” Archive located at UW-Milwaukee Archives. (Milwaukee)

<http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/GPU/GPUHome.html>

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Gay People's Union, prod. *Gay Perspective Radio Show*. 1971-1972.

and seldom entertaining.”⁸³ While it lasted only for a year, *Gay Perspective* was important because it was an attempt by the GPU to expand itself and its outreach efforts into new mediums to reach broader and different audiences. For probably the first time in Wisconsin history, people could become informed about GLBT issues for free while literally driving around downtown Milwaukee.

Finally, members of the GPU seemed to take the idea of community outreach much more seriously than the membership of the City Club. Where the City Club of Milwaukee only seemed to be really interested in the public during times of elections or campaigning for the passage of a referendum, the GPU was actively sending members out into the community (and even into other communities) for even the flimsiest of reasons, seemingly just to put a face on their struggle. Members began taking trips to universities around the state and either conducting or disrupting talks on the subject of homosexuality, for the expressed reasons of convincing, prodding, or even angering individuals to keep talking about GLBT issues. One example of a GPU member taking action to rally support directly to the cause of Gay rights happened in January of 1972, when a representative of the GPU attended a mock “trial,” at Carroll College— a private Catholic institution, and took the witness stand in front of a crowd of “over 1,000” faculty and students of that University, and proclaimed himself to be a homosexual.⁸⁴ While not necessarily the most effective way to draw sympathy for a cause, this action shows just how daring members of the GPU were willing to be in order to achieve the goals of the organization, especially considering that showing ones face and making the assertion of being homosexual even in front of small crowds was a very dangerous act during this decade. And while not all actions were quite as bold as taking a witness stand at a mock trial in front of a crowd of 1,000 people, the GPU was constantly making sure there was enough news to fill the next newspaper. Milwaukee's first openly GLBT Dances, drag shows, and parades were all organized by the GPU

⁸³ GPU News Editor. "Editorial." *GPU News* (Milwaukee), November 1971.

⁸⁴ GPU News Staff. "GPU Representative on Trial." *GPU News* (Milwaukee), February 1972.

during the 1970's. They used these events to draw as much attention to themselves as possible. Constant public exposure was a thing of great importance that the GPU needed to continue growing and expanding, and this is an area in which they were an unbridled success. GLBT peoples everywhere during the early 1970's were living during an explosive time, when homosexuality was making a surge toward the surface of American culture, and the GPU understood that the only way to make any real gains was to keep that surge going, and ride it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the similarities in organizational structure, political activism, community networking imply that the Gay People's Union was cut from the same mold as the City Club, while the overt discrepancies in style of reaching out and educating the community can legitimately be chalked up to the differences between the two organizations in terms of their goals and membership. The City Club of Milwaukee was formed in an climate of political corruption and Laissez-faire run amok. As a group, they organized themselves in a way to increase their leverage in their community in as many ways as they possibly could, and in many ways, they succeeded. The Club indeed outlasted the progressive era in Wisconsin, and didn't officially cease to exist as a corporation until much later, after falling from its status as a progressive organization into what appeared to be little more than a community social group.⁸⁵ It established itself so well as a grassroots organization that its activities and organization became prime examples of an organizational model that can be seen in groups devoted to even more diverse topics than even just equal rights for GLBT people. The GPU adopted as much of the City Club's organizational model to their own uses as they could—and they improvised and used new technologies that were unavailable to the early 20th century City Club in ways that show both the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the members of the GPU and the adaptability of the model

⁸⁵ Keeran, "Milwaukee Reformers," 110.

as a whole. The GPU went on in Milwaukee to inspire the formation of many new, more specialized groups devoted to either the well-being of GLBT people or the bringing about GLBT rights, such as "...BESTD (1974), GAMMA (1978)," and the "Cream City Foundation (1982)," and never itself officially disbanded, but has simply fallen into inactivity since the latter half of the 1980's.⁸⁶

The 20th century was a century full of intense political and societal conflict and alteration. In one century alone, the United States of America legalized suffrage for women, effectively did away with political machines, racially integrated the armed forces and made honest efforts to enforce equality for almost every minority group imaginable- including homosexuals. Despite the fact that it seems that homosexuals represent one of the last minority groups it is still legal to persecute in many states, the LGBT population has made great strides toward being fully accepted into American society, and the Gay People's Union is the representative responsible for making the very first few steps toward bringing GLBT rights to Milwaukee and Wisconsin. In today's world where such institutions as the US Military and Marriage are being challenged and criticized heavily for their "backwards" way of not allowing GLBT people to participate in them freely, it is important to remember that the political battles ongoing today are the results of actions that started almost four decades ago, and that prior to the efforts of the brave men and women of the GPU it was completely impossible for anyone that identified as GLBT openly to sustain themselves anywhere in society- it was an environment of such harsh discrimination that even the suggestion of a person being homosexual was enough of a reason for them to be fired from their jobs, kicked out of their homes, possibly even enough for them to be murdered. The GPU was an organization formed not for a fight as small as simply make it legal for homosexuals to be married, or to be allowed in the military. The GPU's fight was that to make the very idea of homosexuality legal in the state of Wisconsin, and while they may not have been the only

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factor in the legalization of homosexuality, the GPU and its members deserve a great deal of credit for their work bringing LGBT people away from the fringe, and into the center stage of Milwaukee politics during the 1970's.

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Appendix I

Michael--

First, you piqued my interest with the mention of "much older Milwaukee organizations that formed during the Progressive Era around the turn of the century" Do you mean gay organizations, from the turn of the century (1900)? Which organizations would those be?

Anyway, as to GPU-- your question is "I'd like to know what kind of effect the GPU had on other gay organizations that formed towards the end of its life as an organization, and whether or not there was any one group in particular that picked up where the GPU left off successfully."

First, I'm not sure GPU ever really ceased to exist entirely. As far as I know it is still appearing in occasional listings of organizations-- although in reality it has not truly been active for at least the past 20 years.

I don't think there was any intentional transfer of role to other organizations; it just kind of happened over time as more organizations sprung up that were more specialized, while at the same time the membership and leadership of GPU gradually declined as well. It was just a natural progression from what at the time was basically just the GPU, which thus took on any role for which there was a need, becoming an "all in one" group-- but as more people became active in the gay community, they wanted to form more specialized groups.

As for successor organizations: since GPU's heyday, its various roles have gradually spun off into various present day organizations:

Health-- BESTD Clinic (since 1974)

Social-- GAMMA (since 1978)

Pride celebrations-- PrideFest (which started in 1988 as MGLPC)

Philanthropic-- Cream City Foundation (since 1982)

Business group-- Cream City Business Association (since 1981, defunct as of 1989, no real successor)

Community Center-- Milwaukee LGBT Community Center (since 1998)

Community activism-- various: LAMM, PrideFest, ACT Up, etc. as needed

I'm probably missing some, but the above were all things GPU was active in, and the current or last organization that fulfills that role. All of the organizations above are either listed on the History website, or have their own website currently.

Have you visited the UWM Archives to view their collection of Milwaukee LGBT materials? I don't think they have a collection of strictly GPU papers, however they do have papers of both Michael Lisowski, and especially Eldon Murray, both of whom were very active in the early days of GPU. I am copying Michael Doyle, head of the UWM Archives, in my reply, as he may have additional input for you.

Please let me know if you want more information of my experiences in GPU (I was a member back in the late 70s and early 1980s, but was not in a leadership role). I could also help get you in touch with Mike Lisowski (who is still around- Eldon Murray died a few years ago).

I would be most interested to see your comparative history paper when you are done with it. It might be great information for an article in current LGBT media, or for posting as a perspective on the LGBT History website. I'd appreciate seeing it when you've completed it, and discussing it then. In the meantime, good luck, and let me know if I can help further.

Don Schwamb

Webmaster, www.mkelgbthist.org

Milw. LGBT History Project website

